

## **Textual Analysis: Moonlight (2016)**

**Sequence Running Time: 00:24:47-00:29:54**

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I have chosen to explore a specific scene from *Moonlight* (2016, Barry Jenkins, USA.), which is specifically related to the social context and director's intention. I'm going to explore how mise-en-scene, editing and cinematography are used to convey the important themes: poverty, drug misuse, and the lack of a father.

Whilst *Moonlight* has been described as "a visually ravishing portrait of masculinity" (Bradshaw, P. 2017), Barry Jenkins only has a small body of work: *Moonlight*, *Medicine for Melancholy* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*. A recurring theme in his work is narratives concerning racial issues and stereotypes. *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018, Barry Jenkins, USA) concerns "two young black lovers as they wrestle against the American justice system" (Parham, J. 2018). I believe that Jenkins presents relatable issues within the black community, using them to connect to his audience.

Set in Miami during the 1980's, *Moonlight* has been described as "sensitively rendered, evocative or [a] surprising coming-of-age film" (Macnab, G. 2017). The film follows the protagonist, Chiron, a black kid who has a drug-addicted single-mother, bullied at school, feels confused by his image and "[grows] up in the impoverished public housing projects of Miami" (Staley, S. 2017). *Moonlight* is from the coming-of-age genre, which usually follow the protagonist from childhood into adulthood, showing struggles in finding themselves.

*Moonlight* is used to present Jenkins' and the co-writer of the film, Alvin McCraney's, similar upbringings: both with drug-addicted single-mothers and financially underprivileged. Jenkins explicitly mentioned in an interview that *Moonlight* was made "not to apply to everyone and [not one] everyone could see themselves in"; The film was made to enlighten audiences who haven't had an absent drug-addicted single parent and victims of poverty.

During the eighties, the inner-cities of American states suffered from the war-on-drugs and the increase of incarceration. Since it was difficult to succeed from legal methods, many young African-Americans joined gangs in order to provide for their families. After the civil right movement in the sixties, African Americans were promised job opportunities however "the income gap between whites and blacks widened" (Zinn, M.B., 1989). During 1980, there was a recession, which made poverty rates exceed to eighteen percent (Blank, R. 1991). Jenkins also said that "American society forces black men to fortify themselves to go into the world and provide for themselves and survive", demonstrating *Moonlight's* heavy focus on masculinity. My research into the context shows a clear link with the film's themes of poverty, drug misuse and masculinity.

Overall, I believe that the key themes of the film are poverty, parental neglect and the expectations of black men; I have chosen to analyse the sequence from 00:24:47 to 00:29:54, where Juan, Chiron's 'father figure', is a dealer and confronts Chiron's mother, who is taking drugs. I have chosen this extract as it showcases the themes of neglect and drug misuse well. Whilst Chiron isn't in this scene, it's pivotal as his mother's addiction

begins to spiral and the argument between Chiron and Paula is seminal to his nightmares and later hyper-masculine character development. Chiron is cared for by Juan, where they eventually form a tight parent-child bond. His mother then returns home after being caught by Juan, shouting at Chiron, before shutting the door and leaving him. I believe that it showcases Jenkins' intention: to establish the paradoxical life of Juan's character lives and the extreme presence of drugs.

At the beginning of the scene, the mise-en-scene shows the rundown streets of an urban Miami neighbourhood, indicating the poveritous conditions of the area; showing how drug dealing is a main source of income. Juan (Mahershala Ali) is seen pulling into the neighbourhood street (See Figure 1) through the use of wide high angle and a camera tilt. The director has intentionally focused the viewer on him, suggesting his importance to Chiron and his role in this scene. The headlights of the car are extremely bright compared with the rest of the scene, making his entrance grand and showing he's a dealer. Overall, the scene contains bright lighting, which shows how normalised drug use is and how it's used openly. Juan then talks to a presumed dealer and with the use of the handheld camera and the lack of editing, it makes the audience anticipate the confrontation with Chiron's mum later on. Juan meets with a fellow dealer: through dialogue this is established, as they talk about business, establishing Juna's presence in the neighbourhood. A mid shot of Juan shows the viewer his change in expression, which Jenkins uses to demonstrate the moment he realises Chiron's mother is taking drugs. The camera then tracks with his movements, showing his actions have been fueled by his anger towards Chiron's mother.



Figure 1: Showing Juan pulling into the neighbourhood, which introduces the scene

The editor (Joi McMillon) uses slow paced editing, cutting between Juan's back and his facial expressions, during the anticipated walk to the car. However, the audience are unaware who's in the car, therefore the slow pace and long lasting shots of Juan walking creates anticipation. The artificial street lamps changes the lighting; the lack of light has implications that the scene will be catastrophic. It's also a reminder that the area can be dangerous, juxtaposing the earlier portrayal. Whilst walking, the shot is framed so cigarette smoke is central on screen. Jenkins purposefully uses the smoke to remind the audience that Juan is contributor to the drug trade. Non-diegetic music is added whilst he travels to the car, consisting of jarring sounds, making the audience uncomfortable and showing the impending conflict. Eventually, Juan knocks on the car door; it's revealed to the audience, through a high-angled mid shot of the two in the car, that Paula (Naomie Harris) is smoking

with a mysterious man. This shot shows Juan's point-of-view, and asserts his power as a dealer and controlling their addiction to narcotics, also showing his morality by trying to care for Chiron.

Juan then walks around to the other side of the car, where the camera pans and tracks his movement. Once Paula is pulled from the car, she stands and challenges Juan's earlier assertion of power and morality; Juan is the dealer and creator of her addiction, therefore his actions to Chiron are immoral. At this point, McMillon is still using slow paced editing, occasionally changing shots to show the two characters reactions. Laxton uses over the shoulder shots and high-angled mid shots to create a hierarchy between the two, showing Harris' character as inferior, promoting the audience to feel apathy, due to her abusive and neglectful parenting. Jenkins is using this confrontation to comment on his views of drug-addicted mothers from drawing on his own personal experiences; showing the audience the damaging character they gain from addiction. As the scene becomes more intense, the editing speeds up, showing the anticipation for the climax of the argument. Laxton uses a handheld camera, allowing the viewer to feel the hostility between the two, which is shown through Ali's performance: a stone-cold expression. The mid shots of Juan's face are meticulously framed, so the dark background of the street behind contrasts with the streetlight lighting the scene, showing Juan's hypocritical nature. Whilst caring for Chiron, and fulfilling the 'father figure' void, we're still reminded in this scene that he's a dealer, and is fueling Paula's addiction. Both McCraney and Jenkins are using this scene to show the development of her addiction, creating apathy from the audience, and trying to show how mothers like Paula act and ignoring the needs of their children.

After the confrontation between Juan and Paula, the mise-en-scene changes to Chiron's house. The atmosphere is more sinister; accomplished with the inharmonious music and uncomfortable long-lasting shots. The editor has deliberately edited these two scenes with no fade, drawing the viewer into what will proceed next. Laxton uses shot-reverse-shot with full shots of Paula and Chiron and the camera stationary, presenting Paula as threatening. Paula's character is framed trapped within the hallway, with the neon pink light behind her, emerging from the bedroom door (See Figure 2). I think she's purposefully been placed in this constricted position to communicate her unfortunate situation: entrapped in this life of addiction. The costume of mother and son is chosen interestingly. Paula is wearing a red top, presenting her as devilish due to her abusive actions, whilst Chiron is dressed in white, to symbolise his purity and innocence in this situation. I believe Jenkins and McCraney chose to present them as polar opposites purposefully, to portray their and bitterness towards drug addicted mothers who act abusively towards family. Additionally, having a drug-addicted mother is similar to being in hell, suffering in a nightmare which cannot be escaped. *Moonlight* as a whole, and especially in this scene, showcases the suffering of the Chiron. During the explosive argument, there is no diegetic sound, the audience can only hear the orchestral soundtrack in the background, making the "audience [immersed in the dreamlike feel] in the world of the protagonist Chiron" (O'Falt,C.2016). When Paula finally leaves the hallway in slow motion, the pink light behind her gradually disappears, leaving the hallway dark after her exit (See Figure 3.), symbolising her withdrawal from his life, as after this no one cares for him. The pink light suggests in this context that Paula is a prostitute, as there's similarities to a brothel advertisement sign and she's seen with many mysterious men

throughout Chiron's childhood . However, whilst this is believable, I also think Laxton wanted the pink to symbolise her struggles of nurturing her son, battling against the desire to fuel her drug dependency. The fading of this light, symbolises the difficulties that progress as he gets older.

Figure 2: Chiron's mother is trapped within the hallway, with the neon pink light behind her



In conclusion, I believe this scene is detrimental for Chiron's character development and later transformation into a hypermasculine image. Both Juan and Paula are important to his story; Juan tries to care for him and be a father figure, whilst simultaneously running a drug dealing business and dealing to Chiron's mother, an addict and eventually withdrawing from parenting her son. These factors are essential in his final image in the last chapter of the film, where he closely resembles Juan and also deals drugs. Chiron's final character shows the detrimental cycle that drugs can create, and the difficulties they've faced of living a life without the presence of narcotics. Both Jenkins and McCraney also used the film to present a version of their own personal struggles so audiences can understand the complicated journey of self-identity, especially in eighties Miami.

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## **Filmography**

*Moonlight*, 2016 [film] Directed by Barry Jenkins. USA: Plan B Entertainment